



MDC Resource Science

Attitudes and Opinions of Runge Conservation Nature Center Lapsed Visitors

Science Notes



Attitudes and Opinions of Runge Conservation Nature Center Lapsed Visitors

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Introduction

Opened to the public in 1993, Runge Conservation Nature Center (RCNC) has 3000 square feet of indoor exhibits, 112 acres, and 5 trails. Programming at RCNC is targeted at all age groups. As part of a visitor use survey at RCNC focus groups were held with lapsed visitors to explore past visitation patterns, attitudes, reasons attendance had lapsed, and what might entice them to return.

Goal: determine visitor interests and attitudes to assist with program development, budgeting, and staff assignments

Methods

Three focus groups (Columbia, Jefferson City and Holts Summit) were held with people who had previously visited RCNC but had not visited during the last year. In addition to residents of these cities, residents of Ashland were invited to attend a focus group of their choice. A total of 26 people participated in the groups, 18 females and 8 males. Focus groups lasted approximately 2 hours, and each participant was paid \$60 to compensate them for their time and travel expense. Focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed for content.

Findings

When recalling past visits, many people mentioned one-time or special events, or unusual things they had seen, such as the “big mount” or “seeing a snake swallow a mouse”. Some people offered more “big picture” memories, such as trails, and well-maintained facilities with no trash. Other positive memories about RCNC included the architecture, the great staff, and the fact that it is free and open on weekends. The trails, picnic area, and displays, (particularly the little doors for kids to open), were praised by multiple participants. Highly praised were the Conservation Kids Club, and special programs on mushrooms, dulcimers, owl pellets, and butterfly tagging.

There were fewer negatives or disappointments shared. Crowding during school trips and Haunted Habitats events, and not being able to register for things as soon as the newsletter was received, were disappointing for some. Several participants said they were disappointed

that the displays and exhibits did not change. Multiple people also said that the walk into the building was quite long, especially for people with mobility issues. Several participants also expressed frustration that vegetation along the trails was not labeled.

Broadly speaking, the age of the participants’ children and their involvement in other activities were by far the most common reason given for no longer visiting RCNC. Another popular theme was the idea of “out of sight, out of mind”: - now that they didn’t received the newsletter they didn’t know what events were scheduled, or forgot RCNC was there”. Several people said they didn’t know RCNC had programs for adults; they thought of RCNC as a place for children. Others said they had already seen all the exhibits, and once you had walked the trails they are pretty much the same. Particularly in Columbia, the drive to RCNC was a factor because there are so many closer opportunities to visit trails.

How could these lapsed visitors be enticed back to RCNC? There were myriad answers to the question, but commonly expressed were desires for more adult-oriented programs, and for RCNC be open at least a couple of evenings each week. There were several suggestions for programs that might be enticing, such as Nature 101 class for groups of people who are not knowledgeable about the outdoors, daytime programs aimed at retirees, and programs about recycling, composting, and other “green” initiatives to involve teenagers.

Management Implications

Overall, the tone of all three groups was quite positive. Ideas repeatedly included the perception that RCNC was almost exclusively for children - a role that it fills very well. It was commonly felt that the exhibits could benefit from updating, vegetation on trails and near the building should be labeled, and evening hours would encourage visitation from groups who might not currently visit. Many people said RCNC was being taken for granted or forgotten and increased publicity was needed. Comments about the staff and volunteers in terms of knowledge and willingness to help were almost entirely positive, and the pride people felt about having a facility like RCNC to show others was obvious.

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